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You Will Know My Work by the Way it Moves: Drafting the Third Text

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You Will Know My Work by the Way it Moves:
Drafting the Third Text

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to every perfect play and every terrible play I have ever worked on. Thank you so much!

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Abstract

You Will Know my Work by the Way it Moves: Drafting the Third Text

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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In this thesis I will define the role of the director as the author of the performance text. I will define this as the *third text* and examine how my *writing* or *wrighting* of this text has evolved through three productions while at UT: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde, The Cataract* and *Colossal*.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a manifesto and its aim is a personal redefinition of my role in the theatre and the creative fulcrum I wish to be in my work. The manifesto of this thesis lives in the breaking apart and re-defining of the word *play-wright.* It will argue that my job in the room is in large part about *wrighting* which in my work includes the language of text but is not limited to it. *Play-wrighting*, as I will define it, also includes the languages of time, shape, space, gesture, theme, world, light, sound and object, these various texts create a third performative text of which I am the author. This definition of *wright* aims to open up the sense of the term, illuminate how I see myself as an artist, and define what I do.

Isadora Duncan writes in her autobiography, *My Life:*

> It has taken me years of struggle, hard work, and research to learn to make one simple gesture, and I know enough about the art of writing to realize that it would take as many years of concentrated effort to write one simple, beautiful sentence.

Duncan and I share the concept of what it means to *wright.*

The idea of one simple gesture or one beautiful sentence being built on rigor, experimentation and practice perfectly captures how I feel about my work in rehearsal and performance. When I *wright,* I employ all my critical and analytical skills to the languages that exist in three dimensional space and I author the *third text.*

COLOSSAL: BEGINNING AT THE END

As I write this thesis *Colossal*, written by Andrew Hinderaker, and presented by The Cohen New Works Festival during March of 2013, is in its closing weekend of performances. This work is the last major production I will direct during my time at UT. It seems fitting to begin with the end in order to trace my notions of the director as *wrighter* back to their origins.

Colossal lived up to its title. By the time we got to performance, we had harnessed the collective powers of a 20 person cast that participated in a three month workout regimen, a live drum line, a massive amount of community support including the donation of helmets and pads from UT athletics, and a ten person dance ensemble that anchored the half time show. *Colossal* could not have been more epic.

The playwright and I committed to working on the piece together long before I had begun my personal manifesto or made an effort to re-orient my role in the room. In fact when we began our preliminary conversations about the play I still believed the greatest function I could serve was to work in service of the piece and put the playwright's play on stage. In other words, I held as a core belief the notion that my greatest function artistically was invisibility.

When we arrived at the first day of rehearsal for *Colossal* there was already an agreement that I would *wright* the movement text and the playwright would *write* the

spoken text. The working idea being that creating in these particular arenas side by side would unlock the potential for some great third thing between us.

What I realized as we began was that something had changed for me artistically since we first launched our partnership. I was no longer interested in staying in my lane and I didn't want to be told what was mine to interpret and articulate and what wasn't. I no longer believed that there was more value in the distinction between our crafts than there was in the melding of them. My skill as a director is not about ferrying the playwright's play from the page to the stage. My job is to intersect my own texts or my *wrighting* with the written word and craft a performative text built of that collision. The articulation of that collision is what I have come to define as the *third text*.

I arrived at the first day or rehearsal chaffing at the parameters I had set for myself a year earlier. I am the one who said I'd make meaning of the moving bodies while the playwright dealt with what they said and why. I was suddenly hemmed in by an out of date and dim view of my artist self.

Yet there was nothing but great joy in that rehearsal room. I am fortunate that the playwright and I have worked together exhaustively for a few years now and I have a pretty tightly focused lens on his writing style and his artistic aims. I am also fortunate that he thinks I am good at what I do and gives me the benefit of the doubt when others might look at the way I sift through ideas in rehearsal with some trepidation. I appreciate that Andrew said yes first to every idea I wanted to try.

I am most proud of the way I threaded the ethics of exhaustive hard work and a spirited irreverence into the fabric of our process. Day one of rehearsal was a mix of push ups till you drop and locker room humor. These were purposeful organizing principals meant to get at some of the play's core themes as we would articulate them in performance. Everyday I challenged the actors to lean farther into the act of physical exhaustion and challenged them to up their jock-like swagger. A group of theatre kids who had little to no relevant football experience were transformed into a football team by the daily practice of embodying and performing football. For the month and a half that we rehearsed I re-cast myself as the play's coach and we drilled the work till it began to move with physical precision.

I find it particularly satisfying to traffic in the huge drama of bodies hurtling towards exhaustion, and I am proud of the dynamic physical event I built to hold the scripted language of the play. The project was a huge success and I was happy to hear from the audience that my physical scoring of the play opened up the narrative for them. I was particularly glad to hear that those audience members who knew me, could clearly see my aesthetic and artistic tastes moving through the work and lifting up the written text. Yet what came of this particular collaboration was a performative text that looked so clearly like the playwright and the director side by side. Though we did our best to support each other artistically we did not blend our art. I made a container for the playwright's words, it was a really memorable powerful container but still a container.

While there are many ways our work together felt successful and powerful, it did not embody the ethos of the *third text* because I made my work one hundred percent in service of the words on the page. While I have no trouble saying that I *wrote* the movement in that play, meaning I *wrote* everything between the spoken dialogue, I was *wrighting* my work for the playwright. I was not *wrighting* from my creative center.

What I want in future collaborations is ownership of my "text." I want to know that the word director is defined as core collaborator and creator in this new work context. I may not wright in ink but you will always know my work by the way it moves.

I've run up against a strange and arbitrary binary in the theatre. This is the idea that if I tell you I work in a language of gesture and shape and movement that somehow kicks me out of the garden of character, nuance, realism and structure. I firmly believe that you can't design the outside till you know the inside. Perhaps what I believe differently from others is that you can get to the inside from the outside.

Yet when I say gesture is a text the knee jerk reaction is that my plays will never be character driven or structurally sound. We divorce the body from the mind and the heart and we lift up this arbitrary notion that what we say with words will always be more important than what we say when we move through space. I disagree. Character is movement, gesture is the punctuation to our words and the body is subtext.

I came to the theatre through dance and though I am no longer a dancer, movement is the first lens I create art through. Even if it is the spacial relationship of

words on a page, I read character and pace, emotion and score into the arrangement. Those structures on the page and in the space reveal the internal workings of the play, and one of my jobs is to figure out how to strengthen, deepen and sharpen that outward manifestation and tether it more meaningfully to the internal life.

I will often ask my students to think about the end of a play that really impacted them. Often they describe the last line of text and then a repetition or a completion of that thought in the body that ends the play. When we can't speak we move, even if it's just your hand, just your breath, just your bowed head. That final moment of the play is all about *wrighting* in three dimensional space. It is the director, the *wrighter*, that ignites that *third text* and articulates the language of performance.

WHAT IS WRIGHTING

As a director my job is to activate all the possible languages on stage that may live alongside the language of written text. These other languages are not greater than the written language nor less than it. They can be stacked alongside the written text and arranged in any order that pleases and serves the narrative goals. Yet it is my job to stack and arrange and re-arrange not just the languages but the hierarchical system of those languages. In any given piece, these languages may line up under object, or body or spoken dialogue. Part of my job is to trouble the hierarchical assumption, and to figure out the unique system that carries the meaning of each play.

In this context the core events and actions of a play that are usually defined only as text based plot points, expand to include other narrative modes. An arm tracing an arc through the air or the still image of an armchair left on a bare stage can function just as written lines do. Those two events: the arm gesture and the spoken word, answer each other, they become a unit of whole meaning. The arm gesture does not illustrate the words, the arm gesture is the word.

An enormous part of my work as a director is about *wrighting* these words. When I engage notions of time, shape, space, gesture, theme, world, light, sound and object, I

engage in the creation of the *third text* and I become a *wrighter.* The Oxford English Dictionary defines my terms in these ways:

> Wright: A builder or creator of something
>
> Playwright: The word wright is an archaic English term for a craftsman or builder (as in a wheelwright or Cartwright). Hence the prefix and the suffix combine to indicate someone who has wrought words, themes, and other elements into a dramatic form, someone who crafts plays.

I am a *play-wright*, the builder and creator of something. I am the creative fulcrum in the room and the pivot point of process. As a director I *wright* the words when I say, "Cross downstage left and give yourself two beats before you ask him to stay." That's probably more of a short sentence, but I am *wrighting* it. I am also the keeper of the grammar, I can bolster a comma or a period on the page or I can add my own in the form of a breath or a transitional cue. I *wright* the punctuation, the clauses, and the paragraph indentations. The physical phrasing of the world is *wrought* by me.

Your experience of a play is not defined solely by scripted text. This text is one language of the play and we speak many languages on stage. The written word lives parallel to languages of light and gesture, not above or below it. In rehearsal and performance I consider *wrighting* a collaborative act and I define this term in the context of the people who work with me. The purpose of *wrighting* is to strengthen the creative dialogue between artists and the texts we *wright* with. I also consider my work to be just

as robust a text as any other. I do not consider my work as an overlay to the written word or an articulation of the written word. I consider it to be a vital language that produces the *third text.* If someone asked me what a director has to offer live performance I would say it is this notion of a *third text*.

DRAFTING: MY WORD FOR REHEARSAL

When the written text shows up in three-dimensional space on the first day of rehearsal, that is when I begin my own drafting process. Until this moment in the process we have all been drafting in our own in various ways. The playwright in a more traditional sense of the word has been drafting mostly on her own. The designers and I have been drafting the world of the play sometimes on a literal drafting table. But when we begin rehearsal I am just beginning to road test my ideas. I will have prepped my approach, but my ability to create even a second draft of my ideas requires this three dimensional time and space with actors and objects. So I prefer to think of rehearsal as a drafting process or a sifting process. Most of rehearsal is not about finishing touches for me. I often shape my language in the room to talk about our day to day work as sketching. Often I ask the actors to be open to "drawing" fast and loose and on repeat.

I consider this drafting time very precious. I come in prepped to try my own "sentences" and "paragraphs" and begin the work of fitting them together. Often things don't work and need to be "re-written." I do the work in layers of sketching, I wait to "write in pen," and I take my time. I draft in rehearsal with the help of the languages around me. I can *wright* terribly sometimes while I am drafting. It is vulnerable work, it is very public work that can very publicly fail. I don't mind this. I don't mind being wrong in the rehearsal room and I don't mind being wrong in performance. Performance

often feels like an extension of drafting. I attempt to treat performance as a work space too, even if that drafting space is only between me and my notebook.

The relationship between myself and the playwright drafting with me in the room is key. Understandably my drafting is going to lead to more drafting for all of us. I am always interested in strong revisions from my collaborators, and I am almost always interested in folks jumping in to try things. I don't have to be the sole arbiter of success in the rehearsal process. But I am less interested when my drafting doesn't have the same breathing room around it the drafting processes of other artists do. I mind when the feeling in the room is like facilitated art project, and when it is clear there is a right way to build the work and we're all afraid of displeasing each other.

At its most basic level I want the playwright to be excited for my failures. It is okay, perhaps even preferable, that initially the words come out of actor mouths the wrong way, or that I made some error in understanding a sequence of events. In those instances that feel wrong or off-track or confused, the written text is reflected back through the prism of other artists' interpretations, and there is always something to be learned in that new articulation.

I want the playwright to feel in some tangible way that their work is not complete until I begin my work. I like to think that the rehearsal room is a place where we can create an idea together and chip away at it until that idea becomes a bad idea and is replaced with another. Working this way takes a lot of ego out of the room and is a

strong antidote against keeping things that don't work simply because you like them. Sometimes an idea stays good through closing night before it loses steam and goes bad, sometimes it happens fifteen minutes into rehearsal number two. Sometimes drafting means we sketch the same idea three different times before we realize that those sketches were doodles in service of a more sophisticated idea. Good drafting helps generate both these short term and long-term ideas, it keeps the channel open to inspiration. I want curious and rigorous drafters in rehearsal with me.

WHERE I HAVE BEEN BEFORE THIS *WRIGHTING* MOMENT.

For many years I have said that I want to work in service of the play and I want everyone else to do the same. I argued that if we put the play in the center and focus our energy on solving for the play's benefit we would be naturally arranging our collaborative hierarchy in a useful and economical way. I also believed that this would head many artistic disputes off at the pass. In production meetings I would ask myself and the designers, "Is this decision for us or for the play?"

I now think the concept of the play in the center is an impossible concept and risks precious decision making. The paradigm has shifted for me. The play is not in the center of the collaboration, the play is in the center of each collaborator. These days that shift shows up in the culture of my rehearsal room. As I will discuss later, this centering notion unlocks the potential for everyone to show up in the room as a generative artist and core collaborator.

Shifting the play into the center of the each artist has irrevocably shifted my notion of what a director does and the kind of artist *I* want to be in my work. In the last three years my artistic sense of self has changed dramatically and I can track that shift through the work I have made and the manner in which I've invited my collaborators into the process.

I've had incredible experiences in the theatre and I've had experiences where I felt reduced to a marionette kept around because I had a loud voice and knew how to "talk to actors." I've been in rehearsal rooms both good and bad where my role and the playwright's role have been very distinct and our jobs in the room have not overlapped. I've been in process on a work where the playwright and I have co-directed, and those rooms have also been muddy at times and sharply active at others.

In all these instances I've learned that those writers and designers and actors enter a new rehearsal process with a line of previous directors trailing behind them. One of our first collaborations will be to learn how to forgive the ghosts of past collaborators as we learn how to work together. We all bring our previous artistic lives with us into the rehearsal room and it's in our actions and assumptions that we learn what people think comprises our job and craft.

I've witnessed a continuum between two types of directors in the American Theatre. On one end of the spectrum, the director facilitates, shepherds, coheres, cultivates and orchestrates. This sort of director is the arbiter of style and holds the keys to craft. They know more about the play than anyone else, they have the best ideas, and the wholeness of the play lives inside their heads only. On the other end of the spectrum is the director who works in service of the artists in the room, is there to execute, trouble shoot and cheerlead. This kind of director gets out of the way of the work. In this instance, the playwright is the sole arbiter of style and the keeper of the world of the play.

The director is there to manifest the playwright's vision and to unlock performances in the actors. This director is the midwife.

These days I object to almost all of these definitions. I choose to encounter everyone in the rehearsal room as an artist and I wish to be encountered in the same way. I do not wish to be the facilitator, I do not wish to be the conductor, I want to *wright* with the languages at my disposal and dialogue with the other languages in the room.

When I began my work at UT this idea of *wrighting* would never have occurred to me. I was trained to be a director/servant of the text. I was the one who got out of the way of the art being made and focused on putting the playwright's play on stage. I did not show up in my work and that was a point of pride for me. Before my time in Austin I hadn't been challenged to carve out my point of view on my work and engage my own desires and tastes in concert with the playwright's.

THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND HYDE: TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE *THIRD TEXT.*

In my second year of graduate school I had the distinct pleasure of directing *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, written by Jeffrey Hatcher and produced in the B. Iden Payne Theatre at the University of Texas at Austin in October of 2011. My third text *wrighting* in *Jekyll and Hyde* was the most heightened experience of collaboration with the written text that I've experienced. *Jekyll and Hyde* was also one of the first plays I ever rehearsed without the playwright in the room, which I mention only to illustrate what it took for me to stop asking permission from the writer to apply my creative instincts to what was in front of me.

Initially the play had little to say to me, but more concerning, I had little to say to it. There was much here to worry about. I have an aversion to women in corsets with knives at their throats. I have difficulty with violence on stage when it feels violent for the sake of violence and particularly when we indulge in our strange cultural obsession with watching women get hurt and cut down with no other aim than to destroy them. I also have a personal mission in my own work to queer our collective experience of the theatre. At first glance J*ekyll and Hyde* seems to tell me only that boys will be boys, and that at best violence was glamorous, and at its worst it was something to get excited about.

I had no idea where to start. And yet I believe this play defines some of my most successful work.

It *is* my most successful work because the *wrighting* process centered around an open dialogue with the play. I demanded that I speak to the play and demanded that the play speak to me. This piece required that I show up as an artist for that dialogue. In years prior I defined directing as some version of ghost writing, I was there as a conduit for the script. It has yet to occur to me that my own artistic energies could be a catalyst for the work. J*ekyll and Hyde* was the first play that needed me to be more than a facilitator to showcase what could be wonderful about the words on the page.

It was the first play that required my visible fingerprints to frame and score and unpack meaning, structure and content. In a simple sense I saw for the first time what kind of play it was going to be if I didn't show up and have a point of view. J*ekyll and Hyde* dared me to get out of the passenger's seat in my directing practice and I took the bait. I never doubted there was a place for the script and I to talk, but it took me a great deal of time to discover it.

When we read through the play the first two times our lighting designer kept crossing out stage direction while muttering under her breath. She felt hemmed in and possibly attacked by the prescriptive directions. Peering onto her script I watched her scratch out directions like, "*A single spotlight glints off the tip of his cane."* Similarly, in my script, I'd crossed out most of the stage directions and when we began to audition the

show, I asked the stage manager to look through the sides and block out what was sometimes half a page of stage direction that trafficked in the minutia of how Jekyll might open a letter and react to its contents.

Yet what became more and more obvious as I prepped this work was that under no circumstances would it be appropriate for me to meddle with the progression of thought or action on the page, that wasn't right, that wasn't an honest collaboration between myself and the text. I talked endlessly about this piece to anyone who would listen. I asked people to read the work and weigh in on the meaning, I called up previous directors and asked them about their experience. I searched exhaustively for a way in.

I have no interest at all in notions of concept that crush the written text under the weight of systems and logic that turn out only to articulate the concept and not the work. I have always felt and always will feel that my first allegiance when I first read a play is to the intention on the page no matter how muddled or buried or antithetical it may seem to my own interests at first glance. I tell my students that when they are reading a play they must assume the expertise of the writer. They must follow the writer's intention as far as they can, follow their logic and see what it gets them, assume as long as possible that the thing that feels strange, underdeveloped or clunky is intentional. It is our job to mine for meaning and be fluid with the idea that what we may assume is bad writing or not working on the page, may in fact just be a different approach to storytelling or a different set of structural or narrative values.

Yet, I lacked a way into this piece, I lacked a key to start the play. Even with my most open heart, I couldn't figure out what was universal and true about the piece. I was snagged time and time again by the plot which I always felt ahead of and by the characters which did not move me. I wanted to change them, or frame them in some way that articulated an agenda empowering the faceless and disenfranchised. But every attempt at that smacked of a concept hammered onto the piece, instead of arising from the heart of the piece. Eventually what I came to see was that I had forgotten to take my own advice, I had forgotten to make meaning of what was right in front of me stage directions and all. I had to lean into every moment exactly as written in order to see where we could begin, and sure enough our process began with letting go of what I wanted the play to be and embracing what it was.

It *was* a story that we all knew, that's what makes it iconic, so instead of worrying about being ahead of the story I began to focus on how the familiar narrative framework could support an inventive look at the people in it. These characters *did* feel stock, they were that way intentionally, so how could I sharpen those archetypes against each other?

As I began considering the frame of the work. I decided obsessing over the contents wasn't unlocking the play for me, so how could I choose to *view* the contents? What arose in my practice was the fine line between concept and style. These are both ways to inform storytelling, but style felt like something based in my *wrighting* because it originated in me and in the center of the text at the same time. Concept has always felt

like putting a round peg in a square hole, sometimes it fits but it does not fit authentically. Grappling with feeling displaced by the play opened up a new creative energy in me and was the first moment I took a step towards the idea of the play in the center of each artist as opposed to the play in the center of the room.

Championing my own point of view on the narrative was something I had to forgive myself for. It was a new idea that my values, ethos and sense of style could unlock and articulate the heart of the play. It was a new idea that the text was not a commandment I needed to learn how to obey, but in fact a template that craved interpretive and creative translations.

What finally opened up the dialogue between myself and the work was fairly simple. I needed to acknowledge and trust that I had the best intentions for the piece regardless of the potential for our differing points of view. I needed to trust that the play and the playwright would see my intention and I needed to trust that my creative instincts were working inside that context.

I believe it is the aim of any good director to give the work a deep resonating heart. The play wants to run deep, the playwright intends to speak to the world and their experience of it. It is up to me to reach for that place inside the work and then give as generously as I can while I am making there. In this case generosity stems from understanding. I can't actually make anyone else's story, I can only make mine over and

over again, but part of my job is to reach for the overlap, find where the play and I tell the same story and move forward together from there.

Here are a couple examples of my *wrighting* in *Jekyll and Hyde.*

THE VIOLENCE:

One of my greatest concerns was the violence in this piece. I have nothing against high stakes drama and physical expressions of that drama on stage. I do have issues with stage blood, stage combat and a violent act without a frame. My interest in our theatrical form is actually not about authentic replication of the life we come off the street with.

Instead I am curious about the authenticity of theatrical artifice. This artifice is expressed in the moments where we ask ourselves and the audience to experience an impossible thing with us: a London street at the turn of the century, Minneapolis at the dawn of electricity, a game winning touchdown amongst hundreds of thousands of fans. Or an event on stage that is actually impossible to achieve like flying or a shipwreck or stabbing someone. Those are the moments where we lift up the artifice of what we do and those moments are where the theatre is truly alive for me.

I don't want to transport you anywhere but into a deeper experience of where you actually are and who you are. I want you to be acutely aware that you are in the theatre, watching us inhabit some other person in some other place. Your experience should be about deepening your "here-ness" not "there-ness," I want you to know me better and know yourself better in the same breath. Endowing the stage with the capacity to be

everywhere and for the objects in the world to be everything is in service of lifting up this artifice, or as Shakespeare called it: the *Rough Magic* of the theatre . This rough magic is the only kind of magic I wish to practice, and in this rough context things like stage combat and stage blood do nothing for the potential depth and breadth of locating the work in it's "here-ness." I have to move beyond the trappings of that kind of "reality" to get at something real.

In *Jekyll and Hyde* a lot of people die. As soon as the department announced that the play would open just before Halloween I knew that some of my greater fears, the part of us that gets turned on by an ultra violent act, or the part of us that cheers on a serial murderer because they are removed from our contemporary context, was being actively engaged in the marketing and understanding of the work.

Now, if *Jekyll and Hyde* had been a play with a heart or a center that asked for a perhaps campy and clownish expression of spooky London streets, I would have jumped on board with everyone else and insisted that we bob for apples in the lobby before the show. But the written text was asking to be taken seriously and so I took it seriously. Task number one was to solve the violence.

As with all great problems, the solution usually seems to lie in leaning into the problematic. I often ask myself, can I break this moment? Can I break the play? This mode of inquiry is designed to find what the play will weather, what it can bounce back from and what it can't. Trying to break the play could be something like, doing it as loud

as possible as fast as possible as gentle as possible. The plan is to take textures of the world to their extremes to see where the sweet spot might be for that particular system in performance.

In this instance the question was similar. Can I make the violence so violent that it is unwatchable? I knew the piece needed to be an absolute massacre to be respectful of the idea of what senseless violence actually costs, and I knew there was no way to achieve that with our usual theatrical tropes. So when I tried to break the violence in the play I came out the other side with objects.

The production team and I began to investigate how we might practice heinous violence on objects as an abstraction of the characters being killed. So the actor being strangled or cut or bludgeoned to death would be represented in an object that we could then tear to pieces. What resulted was an uncanny and horrific experience of death on stage. There were some objects that functioned better than others, but for the most part each death was represented by a burlap bag filled with sand, or kitty litter or walnuts shells all dyed a horrible red brown. Each bag functioned differently depending on the type of murder committed and each bag emptied its contents when ripped or stabbed or torn. Most notably the second to last bag which signaled the murder of both Jekyll and Hyde, was torn apart by the two actors playing Jekyll and Hyde to create a curtain of red sand that hung in the air just long enough to look like a gruesome floating sculpture before falling to the floor and dribbling down the stage. The “body bag” solution to *Jekyll*

and Hyde I would call *wrighting.* That's my sense of what is at the heart of the play and what the play needs articulated from me.

Of course there were also moments where I was less noble and tried to redirect around a piece of staging in the script that I couldn't get on board with. In many cases the play was happy to work with me because the decision seemed to be about translation not editing for content. But in some cases, I did manage to break the play.

THE WOMEN:

These less noble moments were all about violence done to women. I didn't want to watch Hyde cut off a woman's face on stage because that moment of brutal violence didn't cost him anything and structurally didn't advance or complicate the plot. It seemed like violence for the sake of itself and I couldn't dig any deeper into the moment to find its larger point of impact on the story. I tired to work around the moment, tried to give the woman in question some agency in the decision to end her life, but I never hit the right structural note with it. Something was broken and I now wonder if the greater part of the issue was my own morals. I may have analyzed that moment to a shredded pulp, there may have been a simple elegant solution I missed while chasing down some other solution that set me at ease.

In another instance I cut a stage direction where Hyde draws a knife across Elizabeth's throat threatening to kill her. Tired of seeing damsels in distress (and just tired of the word damsel) I decided I would go after the violence in a different way. But my

proposed solution stopped the scene from working. Eventually the actors, aware of my aversion to the beat but also comfortable flagging information I might be missing as the outside eye, told me the rhythm was off without that knife slice through the air. They were right and I made my peace with the moment and we moved on. It was a prime example of a piece of staging that turned out to be for me but not for the play and a prime example of *wrighting* as a collaborative act with the performers.

Jekyll and Hyde changed me artistically. It taught me that being a stranger to the work is often a blessing. The experience of working from the outside edge to the inside core of the play required that I use my own artistic compass to find the place to begin. My job became to situate myself in the intention of the play and peel back what didn't work for me to reveal what did. I had to find the piece of the play's heart that ignited my creativity. I had to demand that I speak to the play and demand that the play speak to me.

Wrighting is about this two way street between the play and me and between the play and the other artists in the room.

THE CATARACT: WHEN EVERYTHING YOU NEED IS ALREADY THERE.

Interestingly or strangely or both, *The Cataract* and *Jekyll and Hyde* have a few things in common. They share a similar world of prescriptive stage directions. Both pieces tell you what people do in addition to what they say. They both lend themselves to an abstraction of place; you can put quote around both their settings. The plays exist in a place like "Minneapolis" and like "London." *The Cataract* intends this abstraction and leans into the theatrical possibilities for "Minneapolis," while I feel *Jekyll and Hyde* needed that nudge to really open up its potential for place to support the themes of the work.

In *The Cataract,* written by Lisa D'Amour and presented in the B. Iden Payne Theatre at the University of Texas at Austin in November of 2012, the *third text* is informed by the size scope and details of the world that are imbedded in the written text. This is a play where my *wrighting* needed to be an incredibly lean machine to support the complexities on the page that already deal with time, shape, gesture, light and object. An example of that complexity would be a stage direction like this, "*They all look at Lottie like, tell me about it Lottie."* The play needs me to *wright* less as interpreter and more as a translator. Since the play will tell us where it is, who is there and what it is doing, it was paramount that we not repeat the information with more visually prescriptive information

that closed down the sense of world instead of expanding it. For example if a character says, "This is where you will sleep," my job is to provide a space where that can be true and in the next instant it can also be true when someone says, "This is a bridge." When this happens the exact same space is endowed with a new intention from the actor and transformed from bed-ness to bridge-ness. The biggest mistake I could have made in my *wrighting* of *The Cataract* is the same mistake I could have made in *Jekyll and Hyde*. In both instances over saturating the world with visual information would destroy the theatricality of the play. Less is more was the name of the game here. A massive piece of textual structure in *The Cataract* was that the characters pointed out and defined each detailed element of the world. The narrative and thematic point was that these definitions of place that came to easily to the characters in the first half of the play would become totally impossible once the characters crossed the half way mark and the journey of the play became about the strangeness of what once felt so familiar. The system of information was in the purview of the written text, our visual work was therefore in support of something else.

Our greatest concern in *The Cataract* was about keeping the play from restoring, meaning keeping the momentum of the narrative alive scene to scene. Lisa D'Amour had intentionally written a play that uses time in a uniform manner to lift up a sense of formality and rigidity on stage. To help support this mechanism we had to find the ways our work could launch the plot from one day to another. We had to keep the play from

turning off every time the couples had breakfast, which was every five scenes. Had we not solved that problem, the neat trick of a uniform time signature that eventually erodes in the second act would have been lost, and the arc of the play would have flat-lined five scenes in.

Our second greatest concern was about "putting a hat on a hat," or repeating visual text that had already been articulated in the writing. In both these cases the key was opening up the multiplicity of meanings to a small number of objects, gestures and spaces. We worked to say more with less and our collaboration with the text was a process of stripping away visual information that was already in play via the heightened and evocative spoken language. Ultimately our design was made of two chairs, four stools, a couple large barrels, a few props and a raked wooden platform surrounded by a moat of dirt.

When limited group of objects can have an infinite number of definitions the object becomes more theatrically powerful as you use the alchemy of words to name and then rename the object. If a chair or a stool can be the bridge or the bed or the breakfast table when an actor points to it and tells you so, we lift up the magic of theatrical artifice through this shape shifting. For *The Cataract* and for J*ekyll and Hyde* we stripped the world down to its cleanest, simplest senses of line, color and texture. We build a context for the rough magic of the theatre to come alive.

When I took on *The Cataract* a great part of my interest was in the seemingly impossible highly stylized highly specific physical language of the work. After my experience harnessing some of my dance and movement background for J*ekyll and Hyde* staging, I sought out *The Cataract* with its rigorous physical text to dig deeper into the language of bodies. My intention was to highly choreograph the play from the first moment to the last instead of choreographing the interstitial moments as I had done in J*ekyll and Hyde.* From what I could tell on the page, *The Cataract* required the physical precision of a metronome to really make meaning of the play, and I was excited by the difficulty of that.

To focus the audience on the physical journey of the play all transition space for the objects and bodies were part of the action. The mechanics of the world were devised to highlight the internal life of the characters. For us *The Cataract* worked like clockwork until the clock broke and the movement of the bodies and objects underscored that. Four stools moving through the air suddenly become two beds and then suddenly become a table and then were suddenly gone. Four bodies moved with calculated precision in Act One and then fall apart into more organic shapes in Act Two.

It was clear to me that Lisa D'Amour was attempting to unlock character, plot and theme through gesture and movement, so I organized my rehearsal process to reflect that. We built physically with as much precision as possible, all moving as a group toward articulating the physical heart of the play. When we were done drafting a section of the

physical language we would thread the phrases together and often realize we had scrap the draft because the phrases weren't "speaking" to each other rhythmically. If you *wright* the language of gesture sometimes it turns out that two gestures "rhyme" or the repetition of a gesture undercuts its intended definition. This became particularly true when we staged the breakfast scenes.

It took a great deal of rehearsal to figure out how to eat in this play. For a while I asked the actors to lift a spoon to their mouths on a full company four count. For a while I asked them to speed eat, after that we tried eating as slowly as possible, trying to fracture the experience of chewing somehow. In each of these drafts something felt labored. Returning to what felt most true about the structure of the play I realized that we were missing a certain sense of formality to the eating.

The Cataract is a play that on many structural levels is trying to get at the kind of formal theatre that we don't have in this country but that other traditions like Noh and Kabuki have refined over centuries. *The Cataract* tries to set up its own rules for this kind of presentational formality and then reveal the rules by breaking them. The repetition of meals every five scene plays into this concept, and the repetition of eating inside the repeating meal should do the same thing on a micro level. In the end our answer came in disconnecting the gesture of eating from the more literal act of eating. What we found was that in this formalized and presentational frame eating is in fact three separate gestures: *The spoon in the bowl, the flick of the spoon in a circular motion past your*

mouth as though you were eating, and the constant chatter of your lips "chewing." All of this was done with a disconnected gaze out to the horizon. The effect was four people who looked strangely like they were performing a ritual that reminded you of eating breakfast. We created a system of physical signs that collaborated with the written word and helped to form the *third text*.

MY REHEARSAL ROOM TODAY

Twyla Tharp writes in her book *The Creative Habit:*

> The composer Igor Stravinsky did the same thing every morning when he entered his studio to work: He sat at the piano and played a Bach fugue. Perhaps he needed the ritual to feel like a musician, or the playing somehow connected him to musical notes, his vocabulary. Perhaps he was honoring his hero, Bach, and seeking his blessing for the day. Perhaps it was nothing more than a simple method to get his fingers moving, his motor running, his mind thinking music. But repeating the routine each day in the studio induce some click that got him started.

In my rehearsal room, our daily practice includes many things: A moment of invocation for the day's work, re-connecting with the specific vocabulary we are building for the play, and grounding each of our individual experiences in the collective journey of rehearsal. I show up to make the work with you, I respect that you have your own notions of what works and what doesn't. We can start in a place of harmony or a place of

artistic difference and move towards what the play needs. The work is only strengthened by our diverging approaches.

If you were to walk into my rehearsal room tonight you would see a de-centralized working room defined by the expertise of the performers and other experts like choreographers, musicians and dramaturgs all generating work to share with the group for feedback and further drafting. The actors, who are typically working in a very rigorous movement vocabulary in my pieces, are completing a warm up that we've collectively designed for this particular show. For *The Cataract* it was the recitation of a poem, and a lap we ran as a cast. For *Jekyll and Hyde* it was ten minutes of flocking followed by five minutes of balancing and catching dowels. Or in the case of *Colossal* it was 20 minutes of passing routes, pushups and prayers. In *Jekyll and Hyde* the flocking work was a daily mapping of the play's dramaturgy on the physical bodies in the room. Flocking as I use it in my process, is a physical exercise with two applications. Either there is no leader and no follower and the group must work to move as one body, or there is a "lead bird" and the rest of the flock must copy to appear as though there is no leader. In both cases the intention was to ignite the space between these actors. I wanted them to move as one cloth on opening night, and in a play where each actor played multiple roles, I wanted that shape shifting to reflect globally on stage. This work was certainly a warm up, but more importantly it deepened the storytelling of the play through the lens of physicality. The point to these experiments in dramaturgy on our feet is to knit us

together in the room, put us in the place of rigor for the work, continually embody the heart of the piece.

Early on in the creation of any work I ask the artists in the room to help me shape the world. Part of our collective drafting process will include me asking them to create gestures movement phrases and representations of place for us to file away for possible use later on in staging and problem solving. For example in *Jekyll and Hyde*, the actors built streets and parks and laboratories out of crates and lighting booms built to roll across the stage on wheels. In *The Cataract* I asked the actors to use the boards and stools and chairs to build a house and beds and as many versions of a breakfast table as they could come up with. In *Colossal* the boys worked in pairs to design physical gestures of weightlessness collision and flight. In all theses cases we are stocking the pantry for the work ahead of us, discovering as a group where our interests lie, where the work comes easily, where we are lost and where something beautiful might surprise us.

The devising work the group creates builds ensemble and builds confidence in their connection with the heart of the play. It creates possible starting places for the work, and ideas to save for when we are stuck. In my experience these collaboratively structured rehearsals make the best kind of brain trust.

Early on in the process I am very conscious of my role as an artist in this room full of artists. Part of my particular artistic function in our collaborative hierarchy is very simply to report back what I am seeing, hearing, or even daydreaming as I watch what's

been made. I act as a tether between what happens in the room and the heart of the play as it speaks to me. In this way process becomes imbedded in the product. On an economical level the actors own their work and further down the line can dig deeper into the material they have generated to fuel better drafts. Asking the performers to engage creatively in this way will save me time in future rehearsals. These performers are thinking inside the play and problem solving the work moment to moment. I don't need to have all the good ideas in this rehearsal room, I invite the actors to share their insights because they have been asked to engage critically and creatively with the work from the beginning. I cherish every instance the play speaks to another artist in the room and compels them to raise their voice and say, "I have an idea."

LOOKING AHEAD: ELEMENTS OF STYLE

For many years I made work that looked like other people and was for other people. Today the approach and performance of my work is far more holistic. I show up in it, my artistic imprint is evident. The three years of my MFA are marked by a slow but steady arrival in my art, and today the pieces I make are the alchemy of many creative practices, tastes and interests. My work is no longer scaffolded next to me. Instead the foundation of my practice and my art is built of my desires and impulses, I no longer direct next to the play, I direct in the center of the play and the center of myself.

As I've continued to show up personally and artistically in my work, I've developed a rubric that underscores some of the core values I hold for rehearsal and performance. I find that what defines my unique style and craft as a director is certainly about the performative text I *wright* but also about the culture and ethos of my rehearsal room.

A successful project includes a well-built, highly economical, and highly personal laboratory for the play. I work in the theatre to make beautiful things and also to satisfy my curiosity for the way people work. The latter is most often fulfilled by the complex process of crafting a room that supports the artists in it and the art of the play.

To frame these ideas on building a successful play and a successful room, I've used *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White as an organizing rubric. I've always admired the totally prescriptive and definitive manner the book is written in. It seems both preposterous and bold to write unequivocally about grammar, and I find it inspiring. I believe that to really get after the heart of the play or the heart of my impulse towards the play I must move forward in definitive declarative statements especially when I am unsure, and most importantly when I am wrong. The artist I want to be in the room is the definitive decisive one. Whether I believe in the idea or not I want to speak about it definitively and then I want to put it into practice immediately so I can learn how it functions. I've used portions of Strunk and White's breakdown of *Elementary Principals of Composition* and *An Approach to Style with a List of Reminders*, to guide these ideas and core values in my artistic practice.

ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION:

Chose a suitable design and hold to it:

The visual design should expand and illuminate the heart of the play. It is wise to interrogate the literal solution for object and place, you will find that literal solution is often a surface solution (it says they eat breakfast so we must have a table, chairs, food and cutlery). Think more about the ways the visual landscape will deepen the words and

actions and questions that live at the heart of the play and the heart of your interests in the play.

Make the paragraph the unit of composition:

Make sure the dialogue is adding up to a scene, make sure the scene is adding up to an act. For the actor, it is in fact not about your scene partner or about you. It is about the play, understand who you work for.

Use the active voice:

Never hedge. Speak in a way that encourages action in your collaborators and ignites creative insight and joyful problem solving. Put the work of contemplation inside the creativity of the group, ask the questions to each other. As a general rule try it first and be vigilant about the time you spend sitting and talking.

Put statements in a positive form:

Do everything you can to encounter the POSSIBILITY not the PROBLEM. Every problem is just as easily a possibility. If working in the theatre feels like a burden or a slog, find another vocation.

Use definite, specific concrete language:

Say what you will do, not what you will try to do. Ask for what you need not for what you want. Make sure you know the difference.

Omit needless words:

If you don't have the idea ready to roll out, keep it to yourself and work on what you do know till the big thing starts speaking to you. On a related note, let the play be as wrong as possible for as long as possible. You are never closer to the right solution than when you are as deep as you can get in the wrong choice.

Avoid a succession of loose sentences:

The scene must have a strong beginning and a compelling end. Sometimes you can be forgiven for a softer middle (you shouldn't be- but you can be) if these other two things are true. Be articulate about your bookends.

Express co-ordinate ideas in a similar form:

Variation on a theme will get you a long way visually. You need only a few *words* with multiple definitions. These *words* may be scenic elements or the sound of a breath. They may be the multiple ways two brothers hold the same delicate teapot, or a whole system of physicality that describes the way you get undressed every sad lonely night. In all these instances, pay attention to the journey of the *word.* How are you versioning this idea or image across the landscape of the play?

Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end:

Theme is cumulative. You can see it when looking back on where you've been. Make sure the last thing you say is loud, clear, reflects where we've been, and launches the next thing that lives outside the bounds of the narrative.

AN APPROACH TO STYLE WITH A LIST OF REMINDERS:

Place yourself in the background

I believe that the work should look like the people who made it. This includes the director. I want you to know I made the thing you are seeing, but I don't want you to notice my creative *wrighting* more than you notice others. Sometimes my job is about knitting together energies and textures and images. When that is the case my touch should be light but comprehensive. When I think of placing myself in the background, I think of the way I use my energy and my focus to hold the room and build the process. My attention in rehearsal should be a model for the spirit with which all collaborators enter the room.

Write in a way that comes naturally:

Even inside a foreign context, *wright* the way that comes naturally. There is nothing greater than sharpening yourself against another context or another artist. When you try

to make “your thing” in the context of someone else’s, you learn more about what you’re good at, what you’re bad at, and what you simply don’t know.

Work from a suitable design:

You’ll need a sturdy frame to begin. It does not have to be perfect but it has to be a functioning best attempt. It could turn out to be the wrong design entirely, lucky you! Build your best guess, forgive yourself for its imperfections and begin the work so the play can tell you where to reconstruct

Write with nouns and verbs:

Keep the world active. Keep it alive. Your audience came to the theatre to forget they were sitting in chairs. The best moments on stage are often a list or list of events that either goes: *What’s better*, and then…*What’s better than that*? Or *What’s worse,* and then…*What’s worse than that?* The verbs are the questions in that list, the nouns are usually the answer to the question.

Revise and re-write:

Always and forever, draft. Even performance is a draft. If you aim for a better draft in every rehearsal than you are tending to the eco-system of the play and the story. Sometimes a revision is a tiny fix: a breath, a downstage hand. Sometimes it is about pattern, sometimes it is infrastructure. Sometimes the best revision is scrapping the idea

that works for another idea that might work better. Dedicate yourself to a life of drafting and you will live inside your work and not in other people's opinions of your work.

Do not over write:

If the play is already saying it, you don't need to say it too. The more impact you anticipate a moment will have the simpler your approach should be. This is always true for deaths, kisses, farewells and births.

Do not overstate:

See above.

Do not affect a breezy manner:

You will never have enough time, you will only have the time that you have. If you use that time to craft something glancing and surface, you have wasted the time you were given. All plays want to be taken seriously somewhere inside them, every play wants to connect somewhere on some level. It is your job not to let the play down.

Do not explain too much:

Keep a secret somewhere in the performance text, it's the same thing as giving your audience something to talk about when they leave.

Do not construct awkward adverbs:

Don't act at the thing, just be the thing. Remember how the actors crossed out the words: *hastily* and *harshly* in front of their lines? You need to do the same thing with your directing. Robust verbs are currency in the rehearsal room, use them to turn the scene on and ignite a moment, you don't need shades of anything else.

Make sure the reader knows who is speaking:

One of my most important jobs is to visually frame the moment, frame the speaker, frame the emptiness of the stage after they've left, frame the trembling hand that unlocks the door. Make sure you are directing focus in a dynamic narratively relevant way. Also, find a lighting designer who gets you and who you also get. The lighting design adds 30% to the work you did in rehearsal, or robs you of 25% of that same work. They are musicians, they are dramaturgs, they should be one of your closer collaborators.

Avoid fancy words

Everything you need to say should be delivered with the word, the sound, the light, the gesture that is needed. Cut the rest. You may not know what's fancy and what's necessary for a long time, so keep all the toys in the sandbox and eventually, when you are measuring the work against the impulses at the heart of the play, some of it will reveal itself to be clutter.

Do not use dialect unless your ear is good:

Unless the point is something hilarious, worry less about dialect, everyone has subtle or not so subtle regional accents. The theatre, at least any theatre I make, embraces the performers as they are. Everything else is embarrassing.

Be clear:

Less is more. Sometimes that means a massive room full of stuff, but more often than not you can make more meaning with less objects, investigate how few things make the biggest impact.

Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity

Enough said.

CONCLUSION

When I am working inside this craft and style rubric, I feel very alive in my art. It keeps me honest and keeps me close to the thing I am trying to make. Martha Graham's work was a deep influence on me as a child as were the biographies and images of many early modern dance pioneers. Agnes DeMille and Isadora Duncan up through Merce Cunningham and Twyla Tharp were all important figures in my young life.

When I was younger I read these dancers and choreographers searching for my own way of working. Even from a very early age I knew the value of a daily practice from the hours logged in the dance studio and as much as I was awed by their dancing, I think I was more compelled by the rigor with which they approached the unknown.

All my life I've known the number one thing one must never stop doing is showing up for work. There are no other guarantee for the thing you hope to make. You can only arrive and begin your best attempt at moving towards the source.

In Anne Bogart's Book, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre,* Bogart recounts these words on artistic practice that Martha Graham once wrote to Agnes DeMille:

> There is a vitality, a life-force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is: nor how it compares with other

> expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you.

This notion of Graham's, that it is not our business to determine if the work is good or valuable or even if we like it, is a balm to my practice and feels essential to the kind of artist I want to be. I have learned that it is not useful to get out of the way of the work. It is disrespectful to my own craft to assume art is something that flows from someone or somewhere else to the stage and I am just there to monitor the process. But I have learned the value of getting out of the way of myself. That is why words like drafting mean so much to me. They release the pressure valve on being precious about what I'm making and instead focus me towards the goal of arriving in the room ready to work towards the art. There is no way to measure what is good or valuable about what I make, there is only the possibility of testing an image or a phrase or a rhythm against the heart of the play as it lives inside me. It is almost an unknowable thing, but it is a true thing. For me drafting is the key to that practice because it allows access to the unknowable. I agree with Graham that art is actually about the rigor of keeping the channel open between you and the vitality that defines your work. There is a lifetime practice in that.

Now that I place the play in the center of myself, I am also responsible for the work. Sometimes we work very hard to bury our authorship in the *wrighting* of others. I

am not so noble that I haven't blamed the lighting designer for the dysfunctional pacing of a scene, or comforted myself that a better trained actor would have lifted a leaden beat or articulately connected a frayed plot point. But I've come to marvel at the great beauty in my own failings and I've come to respect that it is possible the draft I made may not weather the whole play. This is because the great triumph for me is in the ownership, the authorship, the *wrighting* of the work. I put myself in a humble place of supplication, I move toward the play with the rigor of my practice and feel for the "quickening."

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